Defense of the Dutch–the Amish Dutch

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JUST about a year ago (in the ECK for May 2, 1953) the Editor in this Corner wrote: "Do you know who the Amish are? Perhaps no group among the Pennsylvania Germans has been so much written about, so frequently mentioned, and at the same time so erroneously presented."

In the course of recent reading about the Amish of Pennsylvania and their relatives residing in neighboring states, I have come upon what is certainly one of the most flagrant misrepresentations of them to be found in recent literature. It was published in 1925 as part of an essay on "The German Settlers in the United States," the latter being a chapter in a book published by one of our largest and usually more responsible American publishers. The author is presented by his publisher as one who has "lived in almost every district and studied at first hand every foreign quarter," and his book is offered as one "full of color, romance and quaintness. . . though studded with facts and sociological studies."

As the following excerpts will indicate, the portion of the book which deals with the Amish is fantastically inaccurate in almost everything it says. At the risk of trying the patience and temper of the reader, in the quotations to follow the author's factual errors and his most distorted misconceptions will be indicated. The purpose, of course, is not to diffuse error, but to correct it — a purpose which, I am sure, readers of the ECK also share. The book under consideration is Konrad Bercovici's **On New Shores**, published by the Century Company of New York City. The copyright has expired and the volume — fortunately — is now out of print. All but one of the quotations here offered are from pages 191 to 199 of this volume.

In the course of pursuing his peripatetic hit-and-run "sociological studies" Mr. Bercovici visited a community of "Amish people, a German religious sect, living in Ohio near Wooster. There are," he adds, "in this country several tens of thousands of them." He says the Amish are "a primitive Christian sect . . . found (sic) by Jacob Amen (sic) some seventy or eight years ago (sic), and they migrated into this country, first settling in Pennsylvania and then going to Ohio, Wisconsin, Utah (sic), and California (sic)." As could have been easily ascertained by anyone sufficiently interested in the subject, the Amish derive from Jacob Ammon's withdrawal from the main stem of the Swiss Mennonite movement in 1693, two hundred and thirty-two years before the author published his historical shot-in-the-dark. Though they are now found in eighteen states of the United States and in one province of Canada, they have never lived in Utah or in California, at least not as organized communities or congregations.

The statement that there are (or were in 1925) "several tens of thousands" of Amish people is indefinite enough to be safe. According to the **Mennonite Yearbook and Directory** there were then 7311 members of organized congregations, and the same source lists 15,955 members in 1954. The membership of the church should be multiplied by at least three in order to arrive at an estimate of the total Amish population, including children and young people not old enough to be baptized into the church. This would compute to 21,933 in 1925, and to 47,865 for the current year. These figures represent the entire world population of the Amish, for since their origin in Europe and subsequent migration to America they have coalesced with Mennonite and other Christian groups in all European countries in which they formerly resided. No one, in fact, knows how many Amish there are in existence at present, for the official United States Census does not enumerate people by religious faith, and the Amish have never responded one hundred per cent to voluntary religious censuses. Counts based upon field work among them are available for only a few of the 205 total now known congregations. The Amish themselves always think of their numbers in terms of the number of local families belonging to each church, never in terms of the total number of individual residents of Amish communities.

Our prejudiced and easily impressionable author proceeds to criticize the plainness of these people. "What strikes one as soon as he reaches the heart of the Amish settlement," he says, "is the contrast in neatness of the work between the fields of the Amish settlers and those of their neighbors of other nationalities. There is a second sharp contrast between the neatness and occasional display of decorativeness of the houses of the people of other nationalities and the plain severity, bordering on ugliness, of the houses of the German settlers." He adds that the Amish have been in this area of Ohio "for many, many years," implying that they have had plenty of time to tidy up their farms and make their houses less ugly. Neatness and ugliness are, of course, highly subjective criteria, and the farther one gets from home in such matters the more trouble he has in evaluating such qualities. So the foregoing assertion reduces to Mr. Bercovici's own observations, which must be contrasted with those of qualified and unprejudiced observers, most of whom would not agree with him.

Two pages later Mr. Bercovici avers that "as soon as an Amish man buys a home, if he does not build one himself, he proceeds to dismantle it of every unnecessary thing, of any bit of decoration, tearing off even the extra moldings from the windows and doors, and whatever happens to look decorative on the ceiling, without, however, replacing them or patching the house up. A front porch, however, will not be torn down because it can be made to serve partly as a root-house and partly as a coal- or wood-bin." To one who knows the Amish people and their way of life, such statements as these are nothing less than reckless exaggeration. As is undoubtedly well known to most readers of the ECK, a tendency toward, in fact a testimony in support of, plainness and simplicity is characteristic of the Amish and of all other "plain people." But to say that the Amish, or any other plain church people, eschew "every unnecessary thing" and prohibit "any bit of decoration, tearing off extra moldings, without patching the house up" is irresponsible hyperbole reducing the author's "study" to a travesty of the truth.

This author claims that the Amish "refuse to use any modern machinery (sic), refuse to have telephones or automobiles, will not read newspapers (sic), and have absolutely no respect for any modern conveniences (sic) . . . Like Mennonites, the Amish wear no buttons on their coats. Their homes are extremely bare and simple, with no pictures on the walls, no carpets on the floor, no curtains on the windows." Three of the first four statements in the foregoing quotation are incorrect as cross-community generalizations; most plain clothes Mennonites have buttons on their coats, and the Amish themselves vary from community to community with respect to usages concerning pictures, carpets and curtains. In one Pennsylvania Amish community, for example, curtains are taboo, but shades are not; in another the opposite is true. There is no hint in Mr. Bercovici's description of regional variations in Amish customs, and the reader is left with the impression that local practices are typical of the entire group. The most charitable conclusion one can come to is that the author is unaware of the wide range of regional differences among the Amish in these matters.

Mr. Bercovici continues in error with respect to both Mennonite and Amish women. "(Men's) clothing is of the simplest kind. Like the Mennonites, their wives wear the simplest clothes and are all illiterate, little more than beasts of burden!" In spite of the fact that the Amish opposition to public schooling beyond the eighth grade is well known (but little understood), we have no proof whatsoever that the incidence of illiteracy among them, or among their women, is any higher than among non-Amish rural farm folk in the United States at large. As a matter of fact, the Amish have three languages, which is indeed, in sharp contrast to the monotonous monolingualism of the non-Amish rank-and-file folk of the United States. And with respect to "beasts of burden," industriousness and hard work are conspicuous among the many virtues of the Amish, and are traits characteristic of the men as well as their wives. How else have they helped to make Lancaster County, and other counties too, "garden spots" of America?

The author's reference to their manner of worship and to their method of selecting ministers by lot is unbelievably inaccurate and muddle-headed. "The Amish have no church of their own but conduct silent (sic) services every (sic) Sunday in some one's barn which happens to be larger than the others. Their minister, who is called a bishop, is elected (sic) every year (sic) in a peculiar way. The names of the eligible males of the community are put between the leaves of a German Bible. The Bible is opened at random, and he whose name happens to be between the leaves is bishop. It very frequently happens that the religious leader is a most illiterate man (sic)." The author is here obviously writing of aspects of Amish religion he has never observed and knows nothing about. He has relied upon the oral testimony of an informant who either himself knew not whereof he spoke or was pulling wool over the eyes of the credulous casual visitor. There is no mention here of the Amish concept of a "church" as a group of believers; of their practice of having their worship services every two weeks, instead of every Sunday; of their preference for the home, as well as the barn, as the place for worship services to be held; of the existence of preachers and deacons, as well as bishops, as functionaries of the church; of the fact that the normal tenure of one chosen for the ministry is for life, rather than for a year. There is no mention of these facts because of the author's ignorance of them. He certainly never heard their unison singing of their slow hymns, their prayers, their two sermons preached at each worship service, or their individual testimonies after the sermon. Certainly if he had ever heard an over-an-hour-long sermon, still characteristic of the Amish church, he would not have said they worship in silence! The details of the Amish selection of ministers by lot are too complicated to be rehearsed here, except-ing to say that the author's description of this process is inaccurate in every mentioned particular.

He next proceeds to describe more mundane matters in their way of life, and he is as wrong in these more easily observable aspects as he is with respect to those more fugitive and intangible facets of their belief and practice which are so much more difficult to study. It has already been indicated that in his statements that they read no newspapers and that they refuse to use modern machinery and all modern conveniences, he is guilty of generalizing from his own inadequate and unrepresentative sampling of information. For these are matters with respect to which there is variation between Amish communities, between separate Amish churches within single communities, and among individual members of a single local church. The same must be said of his statement that "Games are **verboten** by the Amish religion (sic). All amusement is **verboten** (sic). Work, food, bed, meditation . . . is the law. They go to bed at sunset. Hardly a house has a kerosene lamp (sic)." It is hard to believe that Mr. Bercovici was in many Amish homes, at least after dark, for lamps are precisely what they do have, in lieu of their lack of electricity in the home. In several years of visiting in Amish homes I have never found one inadequately provided with the non-electric means of illumination their religion permits. And that their forms of recreation are merely different from ours, not that they entirely lack all forms, is immediately apparent to anyone who has observed them during their leisure time.

The author also states that "it is against their religious principles that children should go to school and learn all those nichts, nothings, that are taught in schools." Their objection, of course, is not to elementary education as such, but to more compulsory education than they feel is necessary for farming. They disparage "book farming," make fun of "professors of agriculture," and contend that the place to learn housewifery is in the home. They are also opposed to consolidated grade schools and to education beyond the eighth grade. I have read dozens of their petitions to have their children excused from high school, and a clear majority of Amish parents justify their petitions on the basis that "higher" education will cause them to lose their young people to disbelief. The basis of their opposition is religious, but they are objecting to what they regard as too much compulsory education and to education which they feel is secular and opposed to many of their basic beliefs. The author's statement that because of their anti-educational attitude "seventy per cent of their English is German" is simply outrageously untrue.

There is one item of relief from the author's critical castigation of the Amish people. He admits that they are respected in the local community. "Though their habits are queer according to the judgment of their neighbors, they are nevertheless highly esteemed because they are good and prosperous farmers." He also acknowledges that the basis of this respect is moral as well as economic. "Though people speak of them with a smile, there is absolutely no animosity among the other farmers toward the Amish people . . . (There is) admiration for their perseverance and hard work, and also because Amish men . . never proselyte, never speak about their religion, never moralize to others about theirs, and are very good helpers and neighbors. They readily exchange work with other farmers." At last Mr. Bercovici has found a fact and has stumbled into appreciation of an Amish virtue. This seems to be too much for him, however, for the same paragraph states that some neighbors of the Amish "expressed regret that they were about to leave the country . . Because of educational laws many of the Amish people of the neighborhood and of other neighborhoods have left for Mexico, where they hope to be given freedom." The Amish are still in Ohio, however, and in greater numbers now than when Mr. Bercovici wrote of their exodus a quarter of a century ago. There are in fact today more Amish in Ohio, and elsewhere in the United States, than ever before in their two hundred and fifty years of residence in America. Moreover, Amish colonies have never been established in Mexico. Again our author has been obviously misinformed.

I find one other sentence in Mr. Bercovici's book with which readers of the ECK will be able to agree. He says that "Customs and traditions are the spiritual bone-formation of a race, of a nation" (page 4). This conviction, although here somewhat unusually expressed, is the very basis of studies such as this column supports. The attitude of sympathetically studying and appreciatively understanding the peoples of the world, including our own cultural minorities and religious sects, is an ultimate basis of resolving many of the tensions that beset our modern world. However, such sympathetic understanding can never be realized unless we are assiduous in correcting ethnocentric misrepresentations. Hence this essay in defense of a particular group of men and women of German descent.